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Press Release

Asia–Europe NGOs Conclude Historic Conference on Citizens' Links Between Two Continents

OVER 350 women and men representing 100 peoples' organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participated in the first Joint Asia-Europe NGO Conference with the theme "Beyond Geopolitics and Geoeconomics: Towards a New Relationship Between Asia and Europe" between Feb 27-29 in Bangkok. This conference was held as a parallel to the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) scheduled to be held between March 1-2 between 10 Southeast Asian and 15 European heads of state.

The conference called on the Asian governments to reject the Multilateral Investment Agreement promoted by the European Union and the World Trade Organization. The NGO meeting also unanimously endorsed the parallel withdrawal of France from French Polynesia and New Caledonia supervised by the European Union (EU)and of Indonesia from East Timor under the auspices of ASEAN. The conference also demanded that Asem governments to end repression and harassment of NGOs and end the climate of fear in which they currently operate in.

At the same time, the conference recognized the challenges confronting Asia and Europe and decided to work towards creating a shared vision and a common programme of action between the two continents based that goes beyond a narrow obsession with economic growth.

The participants were of the view that by centering relations on mere geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations, Asem is primarily serving the narrow interests of dominant elites in the two regions.

It is in this context that the participants sought to put forward an alternative vision that would be people-centered, socially just, economically equitable, ecologically sustainable and politically participatory. Such a vision would embody respect for human rights and human dignity and nurture the spiritual, moral, intellectual and cultural lives of all individuals and communities in both the regions.

Towards this end, the conference urged for transparency and accountability in the Asem process. The participation of citizens in the decision-making process of governments in both continents should not be just limited to parliamentarians and business people.

Participants agreed that organizations of workers, women, indigenous and tribal communities, popular organizations and NGOs have to be also included. In this regard, the conference declaration expressed the desire to look forward to a continuing dialogue and to the establishment of the mechanisms that would facilitate this. This demands social commitment and political will on the part of governments of Asia and Europe.

As part of this process, the 25 governments should ensure that women's human rights are respected and promoted and that the benefits of economic development are shared more equitably.

The conference endorsed that respect for human rights should be central to Asia-Europe relations and emphasized that participating countries in Asem are all signatories to UN summit declarations (Rio 1992, Vienna 1993, Cairo 1994, Copenhagen and Beijing 1995). As of such conference participants reminded the Asem govenments to remember their obligations and responsibilities under these convenants and give utmost respect to the protection of human rights.

The conference condemned violations of human rights of the people of Northern Ireland as well as those of East Timor and Burma.

On Northern Ireland, the conference condemned the inaction of the British government over the last 18 months in relation to the ongoing conflict. The conference also urged the British government to immediately establish inclusive all party negotiations which should lead to a comprehensive political settlement and include burning issues such as policing, release of political prisoners, demilitarization of all parties in the conflict and adherence to international human rights standards.

The first Asia-Europe NGO Conference strongly condemned what it characterized as the shameless efforts of the Indonesian government to prevent any discussion of East Timor at Asem, and strongly criticized governments such as the Philippines and Thailand for bowing to Indonesian pressure. It vigorously protested against the decision of the Thai government not to

allow the East Timorese resistance leader Jose Ramos-Horta to visit Thailand in order to attend this NGO conference.

The conference went on record as being deeply concerned about the ongoing gross violations of human rights in East Timor and called for the unconditional release of Xanana Gusmao and all East Timorese political leaders. Also the conference firmly endorsed East Timor's demand for self-determination and welcomed the growing movement of solidarity with East Timor in the countries of Southeast Asia and Europe.

On Burma, the conference urged the Asian and European governments to suspend political and economic relations with SLORC until the latter entered into dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and released all political prisoners. The conference also called on the SLORC to recognize the results of the 1991 election won by the National League for Democracy.

Among the other recommendations to the Asem delegates were the following:

1. The Asian leaders should demand that the EU radically revise the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) so as to end the heavy subsidization of European agriculture that has encouraged the EU to dump agricultural products in Asian and other developing countries, thus causing tremendous hardship for Asian farmers and threatening food security.

2. The Asem governments should ratify and implement the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and cease violating their political and economic rights.

3. The European Union governments must phase out conventional arms sales to Asia that have triggered an arms race in the region.

4. Asem governments must be serious about their commitment to conclude the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and are urged to negotiate a treaty specifying a rigid timetable for nuclear disarmament that would serve as a necessary companion to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

5. Asian leaders must resist EU demands via the WTO to open up their telecommunications, maritime, and other sectors, or risk the bankruptcy of local ndustries and greater exploitation of the work force by multinational companies.

The Frrst Asia-Europe NGO Conference has paved the way for people in the two continents to create a new relationship that transcends geopolitics and geoeconomics.

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